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SUBJECT: VIETNAM'S CAGED BEARS: HCMC'S SMALL STEPS AT PROTECTION
AREN'T UP TO THE CHALLENGE

REF: 2007 HANOI 1763

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¶1. (U) Summary: Ho Chi Minh City is home to a number of wild-game restaurants now coming under greater scrutiny because they push the line between exotic and illegal. After a concerned Amcit recently reported seven bears caged outside one such restaurant, the Consulate followed up. While we learned that HCMC's Forest Protection Department is working with the NGO "Wildlife at Risk" to monitor and protect the captive bears, we also found that the City lacks the resources (and some argue the will) to eradicate illicit bear farms (where bears are 'tapped' for their bile). Given its own limitations, the City has authorized certain NGOs to register and monitor the health of illegally held bears, which reportedly are to be released to more humane facilities as sites are developed. Against the backdrop of widespread lack of appreciation of, or commitment to, the protection of wildlife in Vietnam, the City's nascent efforts at saving the bears face an uphill struggle. End Summary.

Caged Bears Draw Attention

¶2. (SBU) An American in HCMC, distressed at the sight of seven bears kept in small, squalid cages outside the An Binh Quoc Minh venison restaurant, notified the Consulate. ConGenOff contacted the HCMC Department of Forest Protection (FPD), which directed us to their NGO partner, the HCMC-based NGO Wildlife at Risk (WAR) started by prominent Dragon Capital investment fund founder Dominic Scriven. Country Director Nguyen Vu Khoi told us WAR was well aware of the An Binh restaurant bears.

¶3. (U) Khoi explained that HCMC FPD's registers all illegally held bears and collaborates with WAR to catalogue and tag (with micro chips) approximately 500 bears in HCMC. The bears in question had been tagged in order to monitor their well-being until the time when they can be placed in wildlife sanctuaries. WAR is working to expand their Cu Chi wildlife sanctuary, some 40 km from downtown HCMC, which is already filled to capacity. The national FPD considers this monitoring program so successful that it is working with the World Society for Protection of Animals, a United Kingdom NGO, in extending it to other provinces.

The Gap Between Legislation and Implementation

¶4. (SBU) Bear bile extracted from their gall bladders and paws remains highly prized in Vietnam as an aphrodisiac and health tonic. Vietnam outlawed the commercial trade in bear products in March 2005, but has not provided the resources necessary to rehabilitate and relocate the animals caught up in the system. Although Vietnam's strong wildlife laws criminalize virtually every aspect of the caged bears' predicament -- capture, sale, transport, exploitation -- insufficient resources, public ambivalence and a lack of political will limit enforcement (reftel).

¶5. (SBU) According to the NGO Animals Asia Foundation, three to four thousand animals are caged throughout Vietnam, often in wretched conditions. Unable to eliminate the problem outright, the GVN is limited to monitoring animals at existing sites (like An Binh restaurant) in order to concentrate their efforts on preventing additional bears from entering the system.

Monitoring Helps, but Abuses Remain

¶6. (SBU) While regular monitoring decreases the degree of exploitation of captive bears, Mr. Khoi concedes that scarce resources and unequal enforcement limit the program's effectiveness. Insufficient government oversight creates opportunities for corruption, and some keepers of bears use personal relationships to evade censure. For example, Khoi is reluctant to antagonize the owners of An Binh restaurant because they are war veterans with political clout. WAR does include the restaurant on a blacklist of establishments that contribute to the illegal wildlife trade that the NGO maintains on the Internet at <http://www.wildlifeatrisk.org>.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) Increased international attention is raising the profile of wildlife issues in Vietnam, and the private sector is funding NGOs help to fight abuses. The FPD's willingness to cooperate with and even delegate part of its mandate to foreign

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wildlife NGOs is a pragmatic, albeit far from adequate attempt to fulfill Vietnam's international commitments to protect biodiversity with limited resources. While Vietnam's openness to international cooperation is a step in the right direction, we see little evidence of a genuine indigenous commitment to protect wildlife. Without such a commitment, the future for Vietnam's bears remains grim. We will continue to monitor the effectiveness of this novel public-private approach, press Vietnam to better protect wildlife and encourage GVN officials to engage with their counterparts on this issue at the appropriate multilateral fora. End comment.

¶8. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.
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